

## NEWS BRIEF

## STUDENTS GEAR UP FOR ISLAM AWARENESS WEEK

In an attempt to foster a greater understanding and dialogue about the world's fastest-growing religion, the Muslim Students' Association will be holding its annual Islam Awareness Week from 10-14 March.

IAW is an annual event put on by the MSA in an attempt to promote awareness and understanding about Islam.

"We have this week to basically allow people to access information regarding Islam from Muslims, instead of say from the Western media," explained Zacharia al-Khatib, MSA President.

According to al-Khatib, there's a surprising amount of ignorance regarding Islam, with many people misunderstanding some of the religion's most basic principles.

"[IAW] is an opportunity for us to portray Islam in a positive light to people who may not have as much contact with Islam and Muslims in general," Farooq Iqbal, IAW coordinator, said.

With 1.6 billion adherents throughout the world and the fastest growth rates of any religion, both al-Khatib and Iqbal note the necessity of a greater understanding of Islam in society. IAW organizers hope to create a forum in which people can ask questions and learn about the religion.

According to al-Khatib, this year's IAW slogan, "One God, one message, one week," represents the theme of unity.

A variety of scholars will speak during the week, addressing such issues as the universality of Islam, its relevance to contemporary society, and basic tenants of the Muslim faith. A variety of entertainment events will also take place throughout the week.

—Karen McKee, News Writer

# Merit-based grants don't factor into new Canada Students Grant Program

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"It's reaching more students, but the students who need it the most are getting less money," Le said. "For the students who [have lower incomes], maybe they would have benefited from receiving more money."

However, Amrhein added that while the idea of going to a monthly fee system is "intriguing," it's still not clear what the distribution impact will be on any particular student.

Rona Ambrose Federal Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs explained via email that the new grant program was conceived in lieu of MSF's pending expiration.

"A review of student financial assistance found that the Foundation had limited success in encouraging more people to go to college or university and did not provide students with predictable funding from one year to the next," she wrote. "Unlike the one-time allocation made to the CMSF, the Canada Student Grants are part of regular, annual program spending. This means that it is now a permanent program."

Mike Selnes, Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) Chairman and University of Calgary Vice-President (External), added that while MSF distributed money to students on ratios of about 95 per cent needs-based funding and five per cent merit-based, the new CSGP seems to bypass any merit-based funding.

According to Selnes, "It appears that there isn't any merit-based

[funding], which I think isn't the best thing in the world because having a bit of merit-based is good—it acknowledges high-quality students, and it acknowledges excellence." He added that the MSF's split between needs and merit-based funding struck a "really good balance."

**"I think that it's really hindering those connections by not renewing the Foundation."**

**MAJEDA FYITH**  
SECOND-YEAR BUSINESS STUDENT  
AND MSF RECIPIENT

Second-year business student Majeda Fyith noted that the benefits of merit-based scholarship go far beyond their monetary values. Fyith, who was a MSF merit-based scholarship recipient, credited the Foundation for establishing networking connections through local, provincial, and national conferences, saying that they helped connect "leaders and innovators throughout Canada that will be the leaders of tomorrow in government and major industry."

"I think that it's really hindering those connections by not renewing the Foundation," Fyith said. "I can't even measure how much benefit I've gotten from it aside from the monetary value, which helps a lot as well."

Second-year kinesiology student Shaughnessy Fulawka agreed with Fyith, saying that she received a provincial merit-based scholarship after being involved in volunteer work and sports during high school. She expressed concern that by eliminating merit-based scholarships, support for that sort of extracurricular involvement may diminish.

"The conferences [through Millenium] are an amazing way to network with people," Fulawka added. "You go from the conferences with such hope in the world; you meet so many people who are so passionate about what they are doing and about what the future can hold—it's just a wonderful experience."

But Amrhein said that so long as evidence suggests there isn't enough need-based funding, he doesn't mind a federal program that bypasses merit-based funding.

"I worry about the provincial and federal governments focusing very heavily on merit base because the definition of merit often converts into a straightforward interpretation of grades from high school and then university," he said, noting that lower-income students who have to work while in school are often put at a disadvantage because they often have less time for study.

Instead, Amrhein maintained that to be competitive, there needs to be a very clear set of merit-driven financial incentives somewhere in the postsecondary system.

"Maybe if the federal government is much more aggressive on needs-based [funding] and simplifying and making less expensive the loan component, [then] it's a good idea for the university through their philanthropic activity to focus more heavily on the merit-based side of the distribution," Amrhein said.

But Ambrose noted that the 2008 budget has also established a new "prestigious Canada Graduate Scholarship award that, when fully in place, will support 500 top Canadian and international doctoral students a year. The new award, dedicated to the memory of Georges Vanier, is designed to attract the best doctoral students to Canadian universities. Budget 2008 provides \$25 million over two years to establish this program."

In the meantime, student leaders are waiting to see how the administration of the new program will be delivered. Acting NAIT Students' Association president Lisi Munro noted that the MSF was extremely efficient, with very low overhead, and hopes that the new program will be able to continue to have the majority of money transfer directly to the students.

"We're looking forward to some of the policy details; right now, they are all broad strokes, and we hope that when the details come, it will be good," Le said.

According to Selnes, "Ultimately, the most important thing is that \$350 million is still there for students every year."

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